

Translation Denies Expression of Figurative Language

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ABSTRACT

Literature in the native language of any country is a rich repository of cultural and linguistic artefacts. Very often, this literature remains unexplored due to the inaccessibility of these authors to a larger audience. It has necessitated the birth of a translator. Translation is the process of communicating the meaning of a source text into a target language. André Alphons Lefevere, a translation theorist postulates that translation is a re-writing of a story. He implies that any text which is translated tends to deploy unconsciously a certain pattern. The pattern could be the use of literary and figurative language or ethnographic ideas. A translated work is unable to explore the metonymic, syntactic or morphological elements of a story. This research paper will argue that translated works deny expression to figurative language. It will do so, by carrying out a comparative and qualitative descriptive analysis of the original work of Marathi Dalit writer Babytai Kamble's autobiography '*Jina Amucha*' with that of her translated work '*The Prisons We Broke*' by Maya Pandit.

KEYWORDS

Translation; Babytai Kamble; Maya Pandit; Qualitative analysis.

Introduction

Translation has always been a way of transmitting and diffusing thoughts and ideas across geographies and cultures. Since ancient times, every civilization has had its own scholars translating works of other well-known authors from other cultures into their own language. Even though this method of transmitting knowledge was quite tedious when compared to the easier and faster oral medium it had more authenticity and validity. The earliest recorded attempts at translation were during the Mesopotamian age, around the 2nd Century BC. The next notable endeavours

at translation were by Arabian scholars, who translated the works of Ancient Greek and Roman writers both for entertainment and knowledge. Later the Church encouraged the translation of the Bible, from Latin to English. In those early times, importance was primarily given to the content rather than the accuracy of the translation. During these translation exercises, very often unusual or unfamiliar words were skipped when they were not known to the translator. The translators would have control over the audience and would reshape the texts read by them. It was only in the 1950s that translation studies began to emerge as an academic

discipline. It was a time when many linguistic scholars began to carry out research on the techniques adopted by translators and the problems they faced whilst translating works from a native language into the target language.

As new research and studies began to be undertaken, many new concepts started to originate with respect to translated works. Translation of works was initially seen as a degrading or a 'low-status occupation.' Hilaire Belloc in his lecture '*On translation*' (1931), refers to it as a secondary activity which was of lesser significance than the original creative activity behind the composition of a work. Besides, translation works of major writers were analyzed as 'products,' and not enough attention was paid to the 'process' that a translator had adopted to create a source text into a target language.

Translation has also played a major role in highlighting the literature of a certain writer or a canonical text. However, these translation works were significant only at the individual level. There are references to translated works in the history of a particular period, but there is no literary system which includes a complete collection of translated works. It was Even-Zohar, Itamar, in his essay '*The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem*' (1990) who spoke about how 'Polysystem theory' studies translation works by placing them in a clear social and historical context. The theory, while it gives a general direction for encouraging translation activities does not actually acknowledge the role played by a translator in this process. Hence, we have translators who adopt specific norms or ways to depict their closeness to the target language as they use it in translated works which however may not be a loyal presentation of the source text.

These formative translation approaches led to the theory propagated by Andre' Lefevere, a translation theorist. In his seminal work '*Translation,*

Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame' (1992), Lefevere posits that a translation work is the rewriting of a story. He says, "Translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting," (Lefevere). However, translation work is important from the point of view that it projects the work of the source author beyond the known boundaries of language and culture. According to him, translation is influenced by two important factors, the scholars (teachers, critics and professionals) who determine the literary system of expression and the influencers or patrons (well-known persons or institutions) who influence the activity or the project undertaken with their patronage. The patronage would be based on the economic status or the ideological prejudice of the patron, depending on which the translated work would be either promoted or rejected. This interrelation, Lefevere argues, creates a certain conflict in the translation of a work. In the conflict, the linguistic often loses while the patron or his ideology wins. It is not surprising then, that we rarely find accuracy in translation. The translator, under the influence of such factors, rewrites the story, though he/she is not overtly concerned about being loyal to the source author. The target language is given preference as also the patron. Another translation theorist, Susan Bassnett in '*Translation Studies*' (2002) claimed that translation is not only using the correct grammar and lexical elements between languages but, also of highlighting the cultural aspects of the society. Therefore, ethnography also began to play an important role in the translation works.

More importantly, linguistics and figurative language play an important role in a work of translation. It is a form of language which can create an aesthetic expression with power, vividness and liveliness. Figurative language kindles imagination and associations in the minds of readers. For a work of translation to

become important it is imperative that a translator knows how to use figurative language. In translating a work, the translator needs to reproduce correctly and precisely the original idea presented in the source language into the target language, without compromising its aesthetic value. Figurative language gives literature, a uniqueness. It is 'a deviation' from what is considered as ordinary by the speakers of a language. Hence, figurative language has to be kept intact in any work of translation. Edward P.J. Corbett, in his book *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, defines figurative language as "an implied comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common" (Corbett, 143). Put simply, figurative language is a method of describing similarities between two things. It is a way of describing a new thing by juxtaposing it with something we already know. Thus, figurative language helps in expressing the known things with reference to that which is unknown. It creates a relationship between two things. And this is the reason why figurative language plays an important role in translation studies.

Many conflicting theories have been postulated in modern times with regard to translation works. From the 1990's a consensus regarding any of these translation theories became non-existent. Instead, a phase of diverging translating theories has erupted. What remains the most constant factor in translation studies is nevertheless, the ethnographic aspect of the translation process. Translation has become an important interconnection between language (linguistics) and a way of life (ethnography). This happens because the translator by and large tries to be faithful to the original text. These two aspects are still at the core of every discussion on modern translation theory.

Some believe that accuracy in depicting the source text in the target language is the goal of translation. While

other theorists claim that figurative language, syntax, and morphology used in translating a source text are important to show the vividness of the target language. A German literature theorist, Hugo Friedrich in his 1965 speech titled '*On the Art of Translation*' (1965) discusses different approaches to literary translation throughout history. According to him, the aspect that is significant to our understanding of translation studies is the '*untranslatability*' of one language into another with respect to the boundaries that exist between two languages. Another theorist Susan Bassnett in her work '*Translation Studies*' talks about two kinds of '*untranslatability*,' one is linguistic and the other is cultural. However, Friedrich gives more importance to cultural untranslatability. This has always been a central issue regarding translation studies.

A final aspect that needs pondering over is the role of translation studies in colonial translations. Colonialization had introduced the Western world to the existing rich literature of the natives. Later in the era of post-colonialization, translation works from Asia, Africa, Canada, Latin America and Brazil have received recognition. Post-colonial critical theories which spoke about 'otherness,' 'hybridity' and 'third space' were used in understanding and interpreting the mindset of the colonial writers. Well-known post-colonial critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have spoken about the inequality in the translation works of the colonial writers. She claims that translation was used in the past by the colonials to show their power over the colonizers, which also effectively curtailed the voice and expression of the latter. Thus, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the colonial translations is the need of the hour.

The core issue faced in translation studies is the role played by language. Translation has opened an entirely new

world of literature in India. Being a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country, India already had a rich trove of regional literature which was inaccessible to the rest of the world. Translation of such literature provided an entry into this unknown world. One such work is the translation of the original autobiography by Dalit writer Baby Tai Kamble. Her autobiography *Jina Amuche* was written in Marathi and published in 1986 in book form. Baby Tai Kamble hails from the Mahar community, and is considered to belong to the Dalit caste. Born in a small village, Phaltan near the city of Satara in Maharashtra, Baby Tai describes her life as a Mahar, the atrocities she and her community were subjected to by the upper classes. In the autobiography, she presents in detail the Mahar way of life, their rituals, their poverty and how their life changed once they embraced Buddhism. The influence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, himself a Dalit, is discussed; how he influenced people of the lower caste to give up centuries of servility to people of the higher caste. Baby Tai develops faith in Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy to enrich her life as well as those of the people around her.

The translated version of the *Jina Amuche* by Maya Pandit was published in 2008 under the name *The Prisons We Broke*. Besides being a reputed translator of well-known Marathi Dalit women's autobiographies, Maya Pandit has also been actively engaged in several activities related to uplifting teachers and women in Maharashtra. As a linguist, she is aware of the challenges faced in the translation of a source text into a target language. The paper has already discussed some of the key issues related to translation studies.

Language, whether grammatical, syntactical, morphological, or figurative plays a dynamic role in the translation of any source text to a target language. In the source text, *Jina Amuche*, the language used is not just Marathi, but colloquial

Dalit Marathi spoken in Maharashtra around the areas of Phaltan, Satara, from where the writer originates. The target language here is English, a language originated in the West, which while it has different dialects, cannot fully address the source text. Mona Baker, a linguistic scholar working in translation studies mentions in her book, *In Other Words* (1992), that if language was just a set of rules and concepts used universally, then it would be easy to translate from one language to another. In that case, a French word would easily replace an English word, which would also mean that learning foreign languages would also be easy and every individual would be learning numerous languages. But, we know that is not the case. Many a time, there is no equivalent word found in the target language to give the feel that has been expressed in the source text. In *Jina Amuche*, the author has used the word 'न्यारंच' in the first line of the text. This is a typical colloquial word used by the Mahars. Its literal translation in English would be 'just like that.' The first line in the source text is 'चाळीच पन्नास वर्षापूर्वीच्या आजोळांच न्यारंच आर्कषण' (Kamble), which if we want to go for a literal translation in the target language would be "Forty fifty years ago going to the maternal grandparents just like that was an attraction." The words 'आजोळांच' and 'न्यारंच' are the words which convey meaning, both literally as well as figuratively. These two words express the feelings of the author that they looked forward to going to their maternal grandparents just like that, any time, and every time. The translated work, *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit, begins with the sentence, "Children love their grandparents' home. At least it used to be so forty-five years ago" (Pandit). Neither does the sentence capture the feelings expressed by the author nor is it an accurate translation, as expected in a work

of translation. The meaning may be conveyed by several orthographic words in the English language which in the other language may be done in just one orthographic word. It thus, makes it impossible to have a one-on-one-word translation of the source text to the target language.

A translator's ability to translate the phrases used in the source text is also questionable. The sensitivity and sensibility that is expressed in the source text cannot be distorted or compromised upon by the translator as the source text or the native author would have used a particular phrase or a turn of expression to convey a certain shade or a nuance depending on the context in the narrative. Such a phrase or expression in the source text, if not translated appropriately in the target language will result in the loss of authenticity. The original text of *Jina Amuche* has used the phrase 'मायेची सावली' (Kamble) in referring to the stay at the maternal grandparent's house. The literal meaning of the phrase in the target language (English) would be 'shadow of love,' which would have almost correctly expressed the meaning and the feeling with which the author used it in the source text. The translated text has used the phrase 'cool shelter of love' (Pandit) which clearly is not what the author of the source text intended. The author of the source text conveys how growing up in the maternal grandparent's house is akin to growing up in the shadow of affection. The capability to understand and interpret a phrase in the given context from the source text correctly is the work of a professional translator.

Every language is based on certain grammatical rules which determine the way in which the words and phrases are used. The grammar of any language is divided into two categories, morphology, and syntax. The structure of words is studied under morphology, while the grammatical use of phrases and clauses in

a sentence comes under syntax. During translation, if there is an alteration in the grammatical structure of the source or the target language, then, it is most likely that the information or the message will also get altered. This can happen if certain text gets added in the target language whilst translating from the source text. A line from the source text, *Jina Amuche*, "जमिनीचा तळवट झाला की दारातील फुटकी मढकी घरात आणून उतरंड रचून पुन्हा ठेवत" (Kamble). The literal translation of the sentence without any change in syntax and grammar would be "When the ground is leveled, the broken pots in the door are brought into the house and placed in a row." However, the translation in Pandit's version is "After that, they would bring all the broken pots inside and arrange them in a pyramid, one on top of the other" (Pandit). Here the translator has changed the syntax as well as the morphology of the sentence. The information conveyed with the use of the words 'जमिनीचा तळवट झाला की' has been omitted by the translator, which makes it an incomplete translation, one which cannot convey what the source text had intended. In fact, the translator has elaborated on these few words in a previous sentence, but that too is not sufficient to succinctly convey the accurate meaning. The word order in certain languages is not as fixed as in the English language, hence grammatical translation from Marathi to English is not easy.

Conclusion

As discussed, translation of a source text especially those texts which use the language and dialect of a certain place, caste or way of life is fraught with immense challenges. In the original text discussed, the author provides a vivid description of the culture adopting the native dialect of the language used by the people of a certain area. While the translated work can convey information about the same, the vividness with which

the source text used figurative language cannot be conveyed in the target language as it has its origin in a language which is fundamentally different from the source language. No doubt, the story or plot can be conveyed with the help of the

translation but the sensitivity of expression is somewhere lost. To sum up, the paper concludes with the statement that a translation denies the expression of figurative language.

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